

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

August 18, 2021

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

We write to express immense alarm regarding the highly prohibitive restrictions on the occupied Gaza Strip and urge the full reopening of the Karm Abu Salem (Kerem Shalom), Erez, and Rafah border crossings. We also urge you to work with your counterparts in Israel and Egypt to secure clear guidance on goods and materials allowed into Gaza and to extend Gaza's fishing zone to 20 nautical miles in accordance with international agreements.¹ Securing these changes is vital to addressing the humanitarian crisis in Gaza which has been exacerbated by the recent hostilities between Hamas and Israel that left an estimated 1.3 million Palestinians in need of humanitarian assistance.²

We condemn Hamas' actions in the Gaza Strip and its rocket attacks on Israel. We also recognize the restrictions and frequent air campaigns have resulted in 2.1 million Palestinians in Gaza to have severely limited access to clean water, food, medicine, and electricity. According to the United Nations (UN), 97 percent of Gaza's tap water is unfit for human consumption and hundreds of thousands of people do not have regular access to clean water.³ Additionally, electricity only runs for a maximum of 14 hours per day and thousands of internally displaced people remain without homes.⁴ Unfortunately the recent Israeli air campaign in Gaza has only worsened living conditions, inflicting \$380 million in damage to the beleaguered strip and necessitating \$485 million in immediate humanitarian and reconstruction aid.⁵

In the face of these glaring needs, government and human rights groups report obstacles to delivering needed aid to Gaza, citing that border crossings are operating at reduced capacity and under tight restrictions.⁶ Humanitarian materials entering through the Egyptian Rafah crossing alone are not sufficient for the humanitarian and reconstruction needs in Gaza. The UN reports

¹ See: https://www.ecf.org.il/media_items/624

² https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/flash_appeal_27_05_2021.pdf

³ <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/response-escalation-opt-situation-report-no-7-2-7-july-2021>

⁴ Id.

⁵ https://unsco.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/gaza_rapid_damage_and_needs_assessment_july_2021_1.pdf

⁶ Id.

that the Kerem Shalom and Erez border crossing have yet to operate at full capacity since the recent conflict.⁷ We urge you to engage your counterparts to ensure these crossings are operating at full capacity to ensure the humanitarian and reconstruction needs of Gaza are met.

Reportedly the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM) agreement meant to facilitate imports into the Strip has been non-operational since May 10, 2021. Two months following the ceasefire, many construction materials remain prohibited from entering the Gaza Strip. In addition, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has expressed that the “lack of clarity” regarding which items allowed into the Strip has been a major challenge to delivering aid. Many groups attribute this to Israel’s ability to selectively ban materials that it considers having ‘dual use’—any item it claims could have a military application. Items previously listed as dual use have included vital materials such as water disinfectants, desalination units, and electricity generators.⁸ The lack of clarity regarding the items allowed into Gaza raises questions over the efficacy of the existing GRM agreement. We urge you to work with your counterparts to provide clear guidance on the materials allowed into the Gaza strip and to review the efficacy of the existing GRM.

In addition to ensuring fully operational border crossings and clarifying the items permitted to enter the Gaza Strip, extending the Gaza fishing zone to 20 nautical miles is vitally important to the livelihood of nearly 3,600 Palestinian families who rely on the fishing industry. We are concerned by Israel’s recent decision to temporarily restrict Gaza’s fishing zone from 12 to six nautical miles.⁹ Although the restriction was recently reversed, the decision to collectively punish the people of Gaza by unilaterally restricting its fishing zone remains extremely concerning. We strongly urge you to work with the Israeli government to refrain from such harmful and illegal actions and extend Gaza’s fishing zone to 20 nautical miles.

The ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza is untenable. Ensuring that Palestinians residing in Gaza receive humanitarian aid is vital to securing the wellbeing of Gaza’s 2.1 million residents. We urge you to work with your colleagues in the Israeli and Egyptian governments to immediately ensure the full operation of the border crossings, reexamine the existing GRM agreement, and Gaza’s fishing zone to 20 nautical miles.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,



Mark Pocan
Member of Congress



Debbie Dingell
Member of Congress

⁷ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/07/1096602>

⁸ <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/briefing-notes/mb-gaza-israel-blockade-civilians-270818-en.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/25/israel-halves-gaza-fishing-zone-over-incendiary-balloon-fires>

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